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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000280

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: UNF government wins no-confidence vote with ease; President drawing closer to radical party

Refs: (A) Colombo 274; (B) Colombo 175

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The UNF government won a February 18 no-confidence vote with ease. In other political developments: President Kumaratunga continues to work toward forming an alliance with the radical JVP party and there are reports that she may call elections in the provinces soon to test GSL support. Despite the Opposition's best efforts, however, the government appears to be in a relatively solid position at this time. END SUMMARY.

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A Comfortable Win for the GSL  
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12. (SBU) The United National Front (UNF) governing coalition headed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe won a February 18 no-confidence vote with ease. The vote in Parliament was 126-84 in favor of the government. (Note: Parliament has 225 members, with 113 votes needed for a majority. Fourteen members were absent from the February 18 vote and the Speaker, per tradition, did not vote.) In addition to the support of United National Party (UNP) MP's, all of the parties in the governing coalition voted with the UNF, including the tea estate Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). The UNF also enjoyed the support of MP's from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a grouping that is not technically part of the governing coalition, but tends to vote with it.

13. (U) In winning the February 18 motion by a margin of 42 votes, the government actually increased its margin of victory from the last no-confidence motion held in August 2002. In that vote, the government won by 127-92, a margin of 35 seats.

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PA-JVP Talks Continue  
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14. (C) The setback in Parliament was bad news for the Opposition. Working together, President Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) party and the radical Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party had moved the no-confidence motion on the basis that Defense Minister Tilak Marapana was mismanaging the security forces. In doing so, PA and JVP MP's took the floor of Parliament on February 18 spouting hot invective toward the GSL's peace initiative, charging that the government was letting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) push it around. The effort clearly did not work: the PA/JVP failed to wrench away any governing coalition partners, including the SLMC, despite the fact that the Muslim party has been lukewarm toward the peace process. In addition, according to contacts, PA/JVP anti-peace process comments pushed the Tamil parties to vote with the GSL, overcoming any TNA doubts about the government sparked by recent tensions in the north and east (see Ref A).

15. (C) Despite the defeat, there is every indication that President Kumaratunga will continue to work with the JVP toward forming an alliance. In the past several weeks, a number of meetings have been held between Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and JVP leaders. (Note: The SLFP is the primary constituent element of the PA.) The two sides have reportedly been working on a document outlining a political program for a PA/JVP alliance. In a February 18 press report, Anura Bandaranaike, a senior PA MP and the president's brother, asserted that the alliance could be finalized and announced in the March timeframe. Queried about these reports, M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, a Muslim MP aligned with the PA, told us that the president has not yet briefed PA members about the possibility of an alliance and he did not think any such grouping would be finalized soon. (Note: In a late

January conversation with the Ambassador, Ronnie De Mel, a senior PA MP, also downplayed talk of a PA/JVP linkup -- see Ref B.)

16. (U) (((Note: In a recent press interview, Lakshman Kadirgamar, a former Foreign Minister who is close to Kumaratunga, was quoted as confirming that the PA was working closely with the JVP, stating: "These alliances are taking place all the time. All governments do this. All oppositions do that...In that context, the JVP and the SLFP are talking, seeking to overthrow the government in a legitimate parliamentary exercise. Obviously, the bottom line is no violence.")))

17. (C) (((Note: In other news involving cohabitation: the president's office publicly released a letter that Kumaratunga sent to the PM last week. The letter hit out at the Prime Minister for allegedly hiring Japanese Special Envoy Akashi to be an "international adviser" for the government. The letter asserted that this supposed action was contrary to Sri Lanka's sovereignty. The letter also criticized Milinda Moragoda, a key minister and associate of the PM, for allegedly being a U.S. puppet based on some of his recent comments. In our estimation, the charge re the GSL and Akashi is baseless, and that involving Moragoda a canard. End Note.)))

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Provincial Elections Soon?  
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18. (C) Reports that the president might choose to call new parliamentary elections soon have diminished in the past several weeks. The general feeling is that the PA does not want early national elections in the near-term because it would probably lose seats. At this time, however, it seems possible that the president may call elections in the provinces soon to test GSL support. (Note: Provincial elections are due to take place next year, but the president can call them earlier.) The PA controls most of the provincial councils and there has been some talk that Kumaratunga might call elections in some areas where she thinks her party may be strong, such as the Southern Province. (Note: The PA has traditionally been quite strong in the mainly Sinhalese Buddhist south of the country. The PA, however, seems disorganized in the Southern Province at this time, with one of its leading MP's from the area recently announcing that he would not support his party if provincial elections were called.) (Note: Local elections are also due in the north and east later this year. These elections were postponed last year due to LTTE pressure. The TNA would probably win most of the races, with the UNP winning a handful. The PA and JVP are not major factors in the north and east.)

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The government appears to be in a relatively solid position at this time. Although the peace process has hit a rough patch and there are economic problems, the government still seems popular. On the flip side, despite its best efforts, the Opposition -- especially the PA -- appears weak and virtually bereft of new ideas. It is hard to imagine how linking up with the Sinhalese chauvinist JVP could help the PA. (Note: Most observers believe the PA did not benefit from its late 2001 alliance with the JVP, for example.) That said, Sri Lankan politics are notoriously fluid and the government knows it cannot rest easy. END COMMENT.

110. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS